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Is "Civil Religion" Helpful, Possible?

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America in the Middle East: The Middle East in America

Proceedings of the First International Conference
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Is "Civil Religion" Helpful, Possible?

Kevin Lewis
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My subject, responding to the conference theme, is the question whether and in what possible ways, if any, might the American scholarly discussion of the concept, "civil religion," have relevance for the contemporary jostling of faith traditions in the Middle East. For my limited purposes, I mean by "faith traditions" the three Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And I wish to focus, from the religious point of view, not on the higher, spiritual-contemplative expressions of each (in, for instance, Kabbalist followers of the book of Zohar, in Sufism, and in the Christian mystics – these provide one special, if rarified kind of resource for ecumenical conversation), but rather upon the manifest beliefs, the symbolisms, and the practices that are not shared in common among these traditions, and that make for tribalism and friction.

I will remind you of civil religion theory-driven description, and proceed to argue that no, as originally conceived and formulated, the concept of civil religion does not fit the situation on the ground in the Middle East – not enough to prove helpful, even from a wishful academic point of view, in moderating the friction and conflict around us. I will draw your attention to some of the many writers who play different tunes on this subject, confusingly broad as it has become in the last thirty years. Out of the mixed bag of these contributions I have taken scraps of inspiration for the argument I will attempt. I will offer yet another speculative description of a common, "popular," "implicit," (but not civil or civic) "religion" or religiousness that is taking hold slowly but surely in the region, slowly but perhaps increasing in pace, now faster, now slower as kinds of American/Western cultural influence and of their reception evolve. I am far from being an expert on the Middle East. But I will frame

my outsider theorizing as a tentative forecast of a certain kind of emerging, postmodern, post-secular, common but not really unifying religiousness in the region – a “religion” fundamentally subjective and personalized, implicit and for the most part “invisible,” evolving in parallel with continuing outward expressions of traditional, tribalized religions, not directly competing with them but effectively moderating or diminishing their dangerously co-optable motivating power in the region.

But first: the term “civil religion” was coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762) to describe a phenomenon to be cultivated strategically: in the main implicit but at times explicit, expressed in ritualized public ceremonies solicited or conducted by the state – that is, civil religion as a kind of social glue that holds society together, as it were, by making sacred the government and social system in place, conferring upon it an ultimacy like that of transcendent divinity. For Rousseau, reflecting on the needs of a thoroughlygoingly secular state, the inferred common “civil religion” would deal effectively with the frictions of religious pluralism as it cemented the people’s allegiance to a peaceful, civil society. This “civil religion” would consist in simple, general, positive, foundational beliefs in which all citizens (as citizens) of the state could share, no matter what other, more specific, traditional, or non-traditional (or “free-thinking”) beliefs they might also hold personally.

By complacent reflex (or so it seems to me) the term “civil religion” remains the term of choice in ongoing discussions of what has been alternatively described as ‘common’ or ‘popular’ or ‘implicit’ or ‘unconscious’ or ‘invisible’ religious-like beliefs and behaviors. Comparative religionists and anthropologists as well as sociologists in North America, England, and Europe have used these labeling terms as well as others as they have contributed different points of view, aims, and approaches to a larger ongoing, multi-sided discussion. But we owe the complacent preference for the term, “civil religion” to the wide and lasting impact of Robert Bellah’s 1967 essay, “Civil Religion in America,” which famously examines the Roman Catholic John Kennedy’s skillful use of non-offensive but ingratiating, neutral religious language in his Presidential inaugural address.¹ In America, the term has been developed to characterize what has been described as the ‘lowest common denominator’ religiousness effectively helping to unite a pluralistic society such as America’s, in which religion has been set apart, separated, from the affairs of state by constitutional mandate.

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To generalize, what the American religionists mean by "lowest common denominator" religion is a non-controversial, popular, implicit creed consisting of belief in four articles: (1) the existence of a creator God who governs his creation at a great distance by or through 'providence'; (2) the immortality of the soul, but nothing more specific than that; (3) that crime will be punished and virtue rewarded after if not during life; and (4) America's special destiny, phrased originally in religious but latterly in secular terms. Critics have noted that these supposedly neutral beliefs are indeed closely tied to Christianity: this "civil religion" includes the chauvinistic affirmation of the nation's sacred myth of its identity and meaning as a nation (including its political and social system), singled out for special favor and responsibilities by a very Christian-like God.

When I teach the concept of American "civil religion," I refer not only to Rousseau and Bellah as sources, but also to the American sociologist Will Herberg, who in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955) argued that despite the differences separating these respective faith communities in America, there is actually more commonality than difference in their beliefs. And to Sidney Mead, who in the essay, "the Post-Protestant Concept and America's Two Religions," argued that Americans tend to accommodate pluralism by holding on to two religions simultaneously, that of their own particular church, synagogue, or mosque (or "secularized" agnosticism) and that of "the American Way of Life," what Mead called the "religion of the Republic," which draws historically upon the earlier, colonial-period conviction that the first settlers were chosen by God to be a "light unto the nations" and to build "a city on a hill" as "the last best hope on earth," redeeming the sad, the broken history of God's world up to that point.² (You recall that this was secularized in the first century of the new nation under the new term, "Manifest Destiny," which continues to cast a spell upon a contemporary America more secularized but divisively jiggered by resurgent expressions of evangelical, revival, triumphalist Christianity). American foreign policy expressions of this exceptionalism and triumphalism do not travel well in the Middle East.

◀ Is "Civilian Religion" Helpful, Possible? ▶

An earlier President, Dwight Eisenhower, however, signaled fairly accurately the character of the preferred "civil religion" social compact in place in America when, in the fifties, he reportedly observed, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I do not care what it is." His sophisticated critics snicker at this, but they are wrong and Eisenhower was right!

Walt Whitman in the Middle East

Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then I contradict myself.
I am large, I contain multitudes.

(*Song of Myself*, 1855)

Well, we do care about religion in the Middle East. The religious tribes care about it, and we care about the shaping sacred history and political fortunes of the tribes, who cannot at present be expected so easily to *agree to disagree*, which is one key function of American-style "civil religion." Nor does lack of constitutional separation of religion and state in the nations of the region make this imported civil religion, bred under different historical-political circumstances, advisable or even possible. But do note in passing the recent writings of Kalid Abou el Fadl (in California), on a new paradigm for reconciling traditional Islamic belief with modern state democracy³, and of Robert Hefner on the experimental accommodation between Islam and democratization in Indonesia.⁴ Not to forget Bellah's chapter, "Islamic Tradition and the Problems of Modernization," in *Beyond Belief* (1970), dated perhaps but worth rereading. Especially striking is Bellah's observations on what he calls the "shadow of illegitimacy" that must fall over the political realm in most Islamic thought, if *not* however, as Bellah argues, for the Prophet originally. But separation or fusion of religion and state is not my concern here.

Rather I would seek a more appropriate language in which to couch a sociological-religionist forecast of a common, popular "religiousness" working its way steadily into the evolving socio-cultural-political landscape of the Middle East.

I draw your attention to the more elusive subjective realm, that of personal and private interior consciousness, and to the drug-like disorienting expansion of self-consciousness, of reflexivity, that follows upon modernization and postmodernization.

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And, simultaneously, I invoke consideration of the determining power of individual life experience, beginning of course with childhood, forming from the depths of the self our evolving respective views of the world around us, no matter which particular cultural context works inexorably to "construct" us.

The especially American export of individualism as a value and an ideal, coupled with the moral encouragement – I'll call it an imperative – to freedom of choice even and especially in matters of religious or spiritual self-determination – this message I emphasize. This message, percolating relentlessly in the region, will continue to increase the kind of self-consciousness *here* in which Americans over *there* flourish (or remain determined to flourish) despite its ambiguous good as an ideal or value in a dynamic, competitive society lacking the psychological safety nets we find in many traditional societies.

For my purposes, secularization and modernization are primarily *about* this increased individualization and subjectivication which effectively throws the susceptible individual willingly, or unwillingly, into what Scott Appleby calls a daunting "culture of radical personal choice."⁵ As Bellah writes, echoing many others, in modernized societies like that of America as well as those of much of Europe, the individual "makes not only his religion, his polity, and his family but himself."⁶ The force of individualism in American religiousness cannot be marked enough: individualism as an ideology, that is, or our common "faith," as John Barbour puts it, "in each person's capacity for autonomy and self-creation."⁷ It governs American lives. Like Barbour, Karl Weintraub writes extensively on the literary genre of autobiography, and, in doing so, observes in the proliferation of autobiographies and of "life writings" generally in the West and in America in particular evidence or symptom of this deeply-seated notion that each person is born unique, with a unique genius in potential to be realized in the course of a particular and unrepeatable life trajectory.⁸ This challenge into which free-choice individuals are born can be a difficult one. As Alfred Schutz puts it, moderns live with "multiple realities" and various "systems of relevance" to juggle and to sort by way of integrating those most important into their unique individualized pattern.⁹

Into the Middle East has come and is coming this imported cultural ideal, for better or for worse: the notion that the individual is morally obligated to freedom of choice, even in one's choice of religion (when one becomes conscious of religion as religion) and especially in one's choice of identity.

‡Is "Civilian Religion" Helpful, Possible? †

Only the individual can author his or her unique life story. And identity worth anything to the individual must be sought tenaciously, probably by trial and error. This is the challenge of Western and especially of American selfhood, understood not as given by family, community, or heritage, but rather to be achieved by careful, patient, exploratory nurturing and egoistic self-nurturing.

The disorienting impact of this ideological individualism in the religious realm can be illustrated pointedly by the exceptionally modernized and modernizing observation of Max Mueller: "He who knows only one religion knows none." To know only one religion, one's own, is to know definitively who one is without intervening question and choice in the matter – that is, without expanded self-consciousness. It is not yet to know consciously or effectively that one's "truth," one's world view, is in fact a religion, a faith tradition among others in a larger world than the one circumscribed by one's family and tribal history and culture. But then to know more than one religion, that is, to be confronted existentially in the core of consciousness by diversity and, then further, by the cultural value and "truth" of other faith traditions and other gods, is to be thrown into the discomforts and conflicts that follow in the wake of modernization as we know it. To know more than one religion may well spoil one for one's own. Secularization proceeds not only by the progressive triumph of the scientific method but also by the cultural relativizing of religious beliefs. Radical personal choice can be experienced as a terrible threat to selfhood itself. And in too many it elicits what psychiatrists might call the destructive reaction formation behavior of violent fundamentalist rejection.

Peter Berger, the American religionist-sociologist whose work I have come to admire, observed early on that the future of religion everywhere—and I think he does mean everywhere—will be shaped by the three forces of secularization, pluralization, and subjectivication. Subjectivication is the crux – what takes place in the distressed theater of consciousness itself. In his book, *The Heretical Imperative* (1979), Berger argues that the defining feature of recent Western religious history has been the emerging *obligation* to choose amid multiple choices of possible forms of religiousness. As he put it, Western men and women have been forced by their evolving historical culture to *pass through* what he calls an "heretical imperative" in order to come out on the other side, remade, as it were, by an achieved, often hard-won personalized religiousness.

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Berger's "imperative" will insinuate itself increasingly in the Middle East, despite now powerful reactionary pressures to fight off heresy and *takfir* "unbelief" in oneself as well as in others. (Who can ignore the evidence of the murderous violence committed by the disaffected hot-headed jihadi out of anger at "humiliations" but, at a deeper level, we conjecture, out of anger born of a wrenching self conflict: the attraction to modernizing freedom, on one hand, and genuine shame at being so attracted, on the other?) From childhood, all over the region, the putative words of God are laid down and subsequently reinforced continually through life in the minds of Muslims (and of the orthodox Jewish enclave), no matter whether they be sincere, half-hearted and distracted believers, or secretly rebellious. Yes, the impact upon the evolving *unconscious* as well as the conscious mind is incalculable, immense. The clash between Islamic civilization, Orthodox Judaism, and conservative Christianity, on one hand, and individualistic, free-choice American ideology, on the other, might seem destined for impasse forever, at least in the public realm. Surely the clash will be especially wrenching where the Islamic tradition elevates submission and surrender over freedom of the will or, as in my case as a visitor, over the abusable Protestant notion of "Christian Freedom."

Formidable as it is, the resistance to modernizing subjectivication is doomed.

Resistance will be broken down inexorably *internally*, especially in the young, who own the future, by the appeal not only of individual freedom to choose for oneself among competing choices, but by the appeal of the permission to personalize, to customize religious belief, rather than to be "helpfully" coerced by family and society into a stock "believer's" approved belief. American/Western culture will continue to invade the mind and psyche of the Middle East with surreptitious, slow-rolling juggernaut force. It will sink deeper and deeper. In some, this free-choice subjectivication will undermine traditional Islamic faith, bringing local variations, new flavors of adversarial secularization. But in the large majority – here I am struggling to remain a realist in my speculation – this invading ideal of relativizing, free-choice self-making will sink down not to replace but to divide the mind of the traditional "believer." There this invading new mind will functionally coexist with traditional faith planted from earliest childhood and retained inevitably in the formation of adulthood – eliciting rhetorical cries of "hideous

schizophrenia" (Sayyid Qutub) from Haredim, Islamists, and hard-shell Christian fundamentalists. Degrees of accommodation of this transformation into divided consciousness wrought by modern/postmodern subjectivication will produce degrees of self-conflict, yes, occasionally expressed externally but, for the most part, harbored internally where subjectivication heightens, torments, and then re-configures self-consciousness.

This coming form of divided, troubled, or perhaps enlarged and empowered double consciousness begs new and appropriate socio-(as well as psycho-) religious description and understanding. A consciousness equipped, whether it wishes it or not, to relinquish the dogmatic principle of "either-or" in favor of the pragmatic principle of "both-and" is coming in strength, I predict. What my British colleague, Edward Bailey, calls widespread "implicit religion" will describe an important feature of the religiousness generally shaped by this consciousness.¹⁰ But the evolving, sort of consciousness itself that I envision also begs comparative description with that savory Polish term, a "head like a shop," that is, full of tools for meeting whatever life throws at us.

Conclusion: not the "civil religion" of Rousseau and Bellah but the "invisible religion" of Thomas Luckmann provides the better description and analysis of this change-in-process in Middle Eastern religiousness. Luckmann in 1967 was describing the personalization of religion in America, that is, the means by which individuals develop their own personal way of being religious by drawing upon many sources, including but not limited to institutionalized church, synagogue, and mosque collective forms of public religion.¹¹ In stressing the subjective, self-conscious process by which individuals in our latter-day, free-choice, pluralistic society assemble the elements of their customized, private religion, Luckmann offers an especially apt analogy as advances in information technology and as globalization intensify the encounter with diversity in our neighbors.

The individual considered as a "religious" person should be understood, so Luckmann suggested, under the rubric of *bricoleur*. And the work he or she does, intentionally and/or through other subliminal means, to assemble a unique personal way of being "religious," should be understood as *bricolage* you recall, the term we first encountered in the work of the French structuralist anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss. The *bricoleur* by necessity must construct his or her world view, as it were, like building a house, or rather an uncomely shack, from whatever materials lie at hand, not according

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to an architect's blue-print, but randomly from scavenged pieces and parts. Luckmann's "invisible religion" is no more than this: privatized and assembled from parts, makeshift, not necessarily unified, and yet, nevertheless—and this is crucial – functional: habitable as a personal "dwelling," if only by the one individual making peace as he or she can with the manifold of his or her experience.

I apply this description to individuals in the Middle East increasingly forced to struggle through conflict between a mind constructed and relentlessly reinforced by traditional religion, on one hand, and a mind like that of the *bricoleur*, cursed (or blessed) with heightened modern/post-modern self-consciousness, re-constructed thereby to seek what religious comfort and order he or she can with the picked-up pieces of religions and values old and/or new encountered on his or her individual landscape.

The mind is not a binary system, it is flexible, capacious

A devout Jew or Muslim or Christian *can* live and function in stability of selfhood while simultaneously "believing" in contradictory values. Modernization and especially postmodernization *have* made ours self-consciously a "both-and" sort of world. Most of us are equipped to avoid obsessive fixations and to guard against one or other of what the psychologists are now calling "dissociative disorders," defined as "disruption in the normally integrated functions of identity, memory, and consciousness."¹² But modernization brings in its wake for all of us the risk of such dissociative disorders as caused, in hard cases, by "unbearable fear" or trauma: e.g., reactive amnesia, avoidance behaviors of all kinds, multiple personality experiences, and, I would add, extremist religious violence done upon the threatening "other" and upon the "other" in oneself. This is a product of America-flavored globalization. And I anticipate the Middle East with its traditional holy sites and reactive religious fundamentalisms will continue to work through it in perhaps spectacular displays of futile resistance, to come eventually, in its own way, to a subjectivized "invisible" religion if not unifying, as a civil religion would be, at least "common" and "popular." And this invisible religion or, better, religiousness will include as one of its elements the persisting and meaningful public display of traditional, *visible* religion: church bells, calls to prayer, recitations of the Qur'an, religious costumes, restrictive foodways, etc. Visible religion will continue to be embraced culturally, perhaps fideistically, in part of course esthetically, but, yes, "sincerely."

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The common invisible religion will functionally include traditional religion, and by including it, I hope, will moderate its extreme expressions-as of course it challenges all of us, east and west, to epistemological reformulation (implicit if not explicit) of what we want to mean by self-consistent personal identity supported by "religious" belief.

Postscript

A month ago in a secure kosher restaurant in Jerusalem, I attempted to explain these speculations to an orthodox Jewish friend from university days at Harvard. He lives happily in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, teaching and writing fiction, studying tradition, but with growing pessimism about the future. When I finished my explanation, he smiled an undeceived, seen-it-all smile at my good-hearted naiveté, shook his head, and moved on as though to mark but to continue valuing, as a would-be supportive friend, my persisting innocence, my naiveté.

Notes

1 Daedalus, *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96:1 (Winter 1967), pp. 1-21.

2 In Robert L. Ferm, ed., *Issues in American Protestantism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

3 El Fadle, Khaled Abou, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004).

4 Hefner, Robert W., *Civil Islam; Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

5 Appleby, R. Scott, "The Study, Practice, and construction of Religion," *Criterion* (Autumn 2004), p.5.

6 Bellah, Robert N., "Islamic Tradition and the Problems of Modernization," *Beyond Belief* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California press, 1970), p. 148.

7 Barbour, John, *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2004).

8 Weintraub, Karl, *The Value of the Individual; Self and circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978).

9 Quoted by Martin E. Marty in his contribution to the Forum, "Sources of Personal Identity: Religion, Ethnicity, and the American Cultural Situation," *Religion and American Culture* 2:1 (Winter 1992), p. 12.

10 Bailey edits the international journal, *Implicit Religion*, and is Founding Director, Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion & Contemporary Spirituality, Middlesex, UK. See Bailey's "Implicit Religion: A Bibliographical Introduction," *Social Compass* 37:4 (December 1990), pp. 499-509.

11 Luckmann, Thomas, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

12 See Tanya Luhrmann, "Trauma, Trance, and God: How the New Style in American Religion Might Be Changing the Psychiatric Symptoms of Trauma," *Criterion* (Spring 2004), pp 213 Daedalus, *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96:1 (Winter 1967), pp. 1-21.